

Chapter 1171

A man who can't even answer. (1)

“Hmmm.”

Im Sobyong casually waved the fan in his hand.

«Interesting stories have been told. Fascinating.»

Namgung Dowi glanced at Im Sobyong with a somewhat displeased and disapproving look. Even Maeng So and Seol Sobaek next to him, it seemed.

‘I guess I don't really know myself.’

It was true that he had felt suffocated. So he wanted to open up and talk to someone, to anyone. But did it really have to be this man?

Still, strangely, Namgung Dowi's steps led him to this place.

In the meantime, sitting together with Im Sobyong and the palace lords wasn't entirely unnatural. Of course, once there, it didn't exactly feel natural, but...

«So, how did the others react?»

«Reactions... well...»

What could he say to convey the atmosphere?

Namgung Dowi had never thought of himself as someone lacking in words. However, precisely conveying the subtle atmosphere in that place wasn't an easy task.

Even so, Im Sobyong was sharp. The intelligent ones could draw a situation in their minds even without a perfect description.

«I guess I get the general idea.»

Just like now. Im Sobyong, who anticipated the reactions of others just by Namgung Dowi's expression, smiled softly.

«Hmm, how should I put it... Quite adept at poking the painful places as befitting the Abbot, but...»

Im Sobyong glanced at Namgung Dowi.

«The reactions of those who heard it are quite interesting.»

«Interesting, you say?»

«Yes, interesting. It's rather obvious, wasn't it, the fact that everyone knew?»

Namgung Dowi sighed unknowingly at Im Sobyong's transparent gaze fixed on him. Im Sobyong continued.

«From the start, isn't Cheonumaeng just that kind of place? Were there really people who came here genuinely drawn by the word 'Hwasan'?»

Neither Namgung Dowi nor Seol Sobaek nor Maeng So could respond to that statement.

«No, here, everyone gathered because of the two words 'Chung Myung.' Even if Hwasan did the same things as it does now, Cheonumaeng could have never been established if the mastermind of those events wasn't Hwasan Geomhyeop Chung Myung.»

«...It's not entirely wrong.»

Maeng So crossed his arms, nodding heavily in agreement.

He, too, couldn't help but sympathize with Im Sobyong's words, given that he was someone who joined hands with Hwasan because he saw potential in Chung Myung.

«But, on the other hand, it means Cheonumaeng is a place that requires sacrifices from Hwasan Geomhyeop Chung Myung.»

«...The word 'sacrifice' is a bit...»

Namgung Dowi frowned, unable to agree.

«In the first place, Namgung never demanded Chung Myung Dojang to spill his blood. The reason we were drawn to Hwasan was because of the chivalry and character shown by Chung Myung Dojang, not because we thought he would be a shield for us.»

«...For now, let's put aside the absurdity of using the word 'character' for that gentleman.»

Im Sobyong coughed lightly and looked at Namgung Dowi with slightly darkened eyes.

«Well, Young Lord's words are not entirely wrong. The reason Namgung's Young Lord follows Chung Myung is not because of the sacrifice he might offer but rather because of the heroic deeds he displayed.»

Namgung Dowi nodded.

When he asked for help from Hwasan, Chung Myung drew his sword without any hesitation and headed towards Maehwado. Namgung Dowi would never forget that sight.

The sight of someone truly putting righteousness and chivalry into practice and demonstrating heroism was unforgettable for the one who longed for it the most.

«But... in the end, it's the same thing.»

«What do you mean?»

«Calling it a heroic deed is not much different from saying it's an extremely dangerous act.»

«...No, how could that...»

Im Sobyong let out a faint sneer.

«Of course, Young Lord would like to argue that the essence of heroic deeds is not the danger but the righteousness contained within... Do you really think so? If Chung Myung Dojang had wielded his sword with the same determination when heading to Maehwado as he did when dealing with local bandits, would you have evaluated both deeds the same way?»

«That's...»

Im Sobyong chuckled as if saying, 'See?'

«It may sound amusing, but it's unlikely. Because what people see is 'what someone has done.' Therefore, even if the act of subduing bandits is the same, if a disciple of a prestigious sect easily accomplishes it, it becomes a reasonable task, but if a commoner from a village fights for their life, it becomes an inspiring tale that moves people.»

Namgung Dowi remained silent, and Im Sobyong shrugged his shoulders.

«In other words, the more we evaluate and praise the righteousness of Hwasan Geomhyeop, and the more the world believes and follows the righteous path of Cheonumaeng, the more Chung Myung Dojang becomes trapped in that prison called ‘righteousness’.»

Namgung Dowi bit his lip. Even if he wanted to deny it, he couldn’t come up with a convincing counterargument. Is the situation already unfolding in such a way?

«So, in the end, Cheonumaeng becomes a place built on the foundation of the sacrifice of Hwasan Geomhyeop. Perhaps Young Lord Namgung has also thought about the fight against Sapaeryeon and Demonic Cult, and in that imagination, how was Chung Myung Dojang moving?»

«Well...»

He couldn’t finish the sentence. Another heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

Fighting at the forefront. Most desperately.

Leading countless people, shining brighter than anyone else, yet, it was difficult for Namgung Dowi to deny it. The fact that the brightest place is also the most dangerous one.

«Remember this, Young Lord Namgung. They exist in this world. Humans who carelessly repeat reckless deeds without looking after themselves.»

Namgung Dowi had to admit it, especially considering that the person who fit that description best among those he knew was Chung Myung.

«Of course, most of those people meet their end. However, one in a million, one in ten million... No, perhaps once every few hundred years.»

Im Sobyong tightly gripped the fan.

«Even after engaging in such insane acts, there are those who miraculously survive until the end. Do you know what the world calls such people?»

«What do they call them?»

«Heroes.»

The word ‘hero’ no longer sounded like a positive word to Namgung Dowi.

Im Sobyong looked at Namgung Dowi as if he was about to laugh.

«In Young Lord’s imagination, after all wars are over, Chung Myung Dojang would have become a hero. Isn’t that right?»

His words seemed to be emphasizing the fact, that Namgung Dowi was among those who had pushed Chung Myung into hell. Hence, Namgung Dowi couldn’t bring himself to lift his lowered head.

«Well then...»

In that moment, Seol Sobaek, who had been silently listening to Im Sobyong’s words, spoke up,

«Is it different for Nokrim King?»

Im Sobyong smirked, glancing at Seol Sobaek before responding,

«How could it not be different? I clearly know that I’m merely leeching off Chung Myung Dojang.»

«But...»

«However... well, who knows? It's hard to say who's worse between those who knowingly use and exploit, and those who pretend not to know while subtly pushing people off the cliff. Of course, if they manage to survive on that cliff, they might become heroes, but...»

Listening to this, Maeng So frowned and interjected,

«It seems Nokrim King's cynicism is a bit excessive.»

«Cynicism?»

«In the first place, others didn't forcibly drag Hwasan Geomhyeop into this. They were simply drawn to the path he was walking. Such individuals are inevitably going to appear dazzling to ordinary people.»

«Hmm.»

A hint of light flickered in Im Sobyong's eyes as he looked at Maeng So.

«Indeed, you're absolutely right. I find it somewhat absurd that I'm now shocked by such an obvious fact.»

«Let's leave it at that.»

«Yes, of course.»

Im Sobyong gracefully withdrew.

Maeng So, perhaps trying to refresh the mood, subtly asked Im Sobyong a question.

«So, what are Nokrim King's thoughts?»

«What are you referring to?»

«Do you think Hwasan will accept the proposal from Shaolin?»

«Hmm.»

Im Sobyong smiled in amusement, lightly scratching his cheek.

«Turnabout is fair play. I'd also like to ask, how do the two lords plan to respond? It seems inevitable that change is coming.»

«Well, as long as the promise is kept, the proposal doesn't seem too unfavorable from our perspective.»

«What?»

Surprised by Maeng So's casual response, Seol Sobaek asked in disbelief,

«Palace Lord! Are you considering accepting the proposal?»

«Please, calm down, Lord Seol.»

Maeng So nodded.

«Comparing Hwasan Geomhyeop and the Abbot of Shaolin is difficult. Trusting Shaolin is not an easy task to begin with.»

«Yes! That's obvious.»

«Right now, the logical choice would be to lean towards Hwasan. After all, Hwasan has Hwasan Geomhyeop.»

«Yes, I also feel that way...»

«But will Hwasan Geomhyeop still be at Hwasan a hundred years from now?»

Seol Sobaek remained silent.

«A century later, Shaolin will likely remain the pillar of the Central Plains, and they'll remember the promise made by the leaders of this generation. However... what becomes of Hwasan a hundred years from now is an uncertain matter.»

«That's...»

Seol Sobaek, who had intended to offer a rebuttal, subtly closed his mouth. Maeng So's words were not incorrect.

«Personally, I don't want to join hands with Shaolin. However, as the palace lord, rejecting any offer from Shaolin, especially for an external sect like ours, is not something I can afford to do. It's not appropriate for a lord responsible for the sect to prioritize my own feelings. There's no guarantee that my judgment won't be resented by future generations, after all.»
Seol Sobaek lowered his head.

«But maintaining the loyalty to Hwasan, which has cared for us, the outer factions, is a duty that a lord must naturally uphold. So, I will simply follow whatever decision the Alliance Leader makes. It's only reasonable.»

Im Sobyong, expressing a slight admiration with a 'hoo', turned to Seol Sobaek.

«How about you, Lord Seol?»

«I...»

Seeing Seol Sobek hesitating to answer, Im Sobyong nodded.

«I understand. In fact, that might be the most reasonable response.»

«So? What's your answer to my question?»

«Actually, from Nokrim's perspective, it would be preferable to decline. Shaolin won't outright reject Nokrim in a situation like this, but receiving the same treatment as now would be challenging.»

«And in Gangho overall, it might be pushed to a lower position?»

«Yes, that's correct. So personally, I hope for that outcome. However...»

Im Sobyong opened his fan, partially covering his face.

«...But this time, the offer from Beop Jong was quite exquisite. Perhaps this time, both the Alliance Leader and Hwasan Geomhyeop might find it challenging to refuse the proposal.»

«But haven't they never declined any offer before? The probability of them doing the same this time shouldn't be very high.»

«That's because everything they've done so far has aligned with the righteous path of saving people. But this time is different. Consider this – if they reject this proposal and Cheonumaeng stands alone against Sapaeryeon?»

Maeng So nodded as if understanding.

«...In that case, all the bloodshed due to insufficient strength would be the sole responsibility of those two.»

«That's right. Such a choice could lead to more people facing death. So, it's not an easy decision, is it?»

Maeng So sighed. It was indeed a challenging situation.

«It was a reality we would eventually confront, but... I never expected it to come in this way. The leader of Shaolin is undoubtedly someone not to be ignored.»

Im Sobyong's gaze turned toward the open window.

«I'm curious too. When everything he has believed in, everything he has trusted, becomes a situation that may harm what he intended to protect, what choice will he make?»

At those words, Namgung Dowi let out a heavy and long sigh.

Feeling the thickened air, Im Sobyong gazed at the moon partially obscured by clouds.

'It seems it will be a long night.'

For him, for everyone else.

It felt like it would be an exceptionally long night especially for one person.